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SCHOOLS MAINTAIN IMPORTANT ROLE IN PREPAREDNESS MONTH

Bismarck, ND – Families trust schools to keep their children safe during the day. The unfortunate reality is that school districts may be touched either directly or indirectly by a crisis at any time. Natural disasters such as floods, fires, and tornadoes can strike a community with little or no warning. School shootings, threatened or actual, are extremely rare but are horrific and chilling when they occur. September, as National Preparedness Month, provides awareness and an opportunity for schools and parents, to review, practice and update existing plans and procedures.

Crises can happen before, during, or after school; on or off school campuses. The definition of a crisis varies with the unique needs, resources, and assets of the school and community. Staff and students may be severely affected by an incident in another city or state. The events of Columbine and September 11 left the entire nation feeling vulnerable.

In support of the growing awareness of the need for disaster preparedness in schools, the North Dakota Department of Emergency Services (DES), through the Leadership and Education Administration Development Center (LEAD), offers preparedness courses several times each year. The course titled Multi-Hazard Safety Program for Schools outlines a specific plan of action for North Dakota schools. Classroom activities provide recommendations for all school officials including; identifying hazards likely to happen in and around the schools, how to mitigate against the hazards, develop a response plan to include an evacuation route or shelter in place, plan for how to cope after a disaster, and implement drills and family education.

“Generally, schools are prepared for most weather related disasters, and they routinely conduct fire evacuation drills,” said Marv Erhardt, Executive Director, LEAD Center. “However, new threats, such as acts of violence or chemical and biological threats, are causing school leaders to realize their existing response plans may be inadequate in the event of such disasters.”

According to Erhardt, 68 school districts have already participated in formal training to upgrade their emergency response capabilities with more training sessions already scheduled for this fall. Erhardt adds that emergency preparedness is only one part of a comprehensive school safety program; he lists “prevention” as an equally important element. Erhardt suggests that when a school assesses its threats, it must look internally at policies and practices related to behavior such as bullying.

“An emergency response plan is a lot like an insurance policy,” said Erhardt. “You hope you never have to use; but if you do, it had better be a good one.”

When beginning a disaster preparedness planning and hazard assessment it's important to realize that past experience shows most people will survive even the worst disaster. Most of the injuries and deaths related to natural disasters are caused by falling objects, fires, release of hazardous materials, flying debris and roof collapse. Schools should look for such hazards when doing their assessment.

Children and youth rely on, and find great comfort in, the adults who protect them. Schools and districts need to be ready to handle crises, large and small, to keep our children and staff out of harm's way and ready to learn and teach. The children are our future.

Preparedness information and links to other web sites with detailed information can be found on the DES website at www.state.nd.us/des. School officials interested in hosting the Multi-Hazard Safety Program for Schools course should contact their local emergency manager. Additional information for school preparedness planning is available on the U.S. Department of Education web site at www.ed.gov/emergencyplan and on www.fema.gov/kids/. Information on training courses sponsored by the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) Emergency Management Institute is available at www.training.fema.gov/.

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